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HYPNOSIS, HEMI-SYNC®, AND HOW THE MIND WORKS

by Robert Rosenthal, M.D.

Bob Rosenthal, a board-certified psychiatrist in private practice in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, subspecializes in the treatment of chronic pain and chronic medical illness. He holds the rank of clinical assistant professor in psychiatry at Hahnemann University, where he teaches a course on hypnosis to psychiatry residents.

“What is hypnosis, what are the differences and similarities between hypnosis and Hemi-Sync, and what do they tell us about how the mind works?” These questions posed by Dr. Rosenthal are also frequently asked by Hemi-Sync users. Using clinical and research data, he reviewed basic precepts in the theoretical and practical uses of hypnosis, a variety of physical and psychological conditions associated with hypnosis, and the corresponding contributions of Hemi-Sync.

Dr. Rosenthal’s background includes teaching hypnosis, and extensive clinical and personal experience with altered states of consciousness. He has specialized in the areas of “affect theory,” and multiple personality and disassociative disorders, and currently focuses on chronic illness, the psychological aspects of pain, and psychosomatics. His spiritual path is the “gel” that holds this all together.

“Hypnosis probably has as many definitions as there are researchers studying it,” said Dr. Rosenthal. Quotations from two highly respected researchers in the field illustrate the diversity. One says “(Hypnosis is) an altered state in which the subject loses willingness and initiative to respond independently. Planning functions are turned over to the hypnotist, attention is redistributed, and perception is made selective according to the hypnotist’s demands. Fantasy production increases and there may be an increase in suggestibility.” Another expert defines hypnosis as “... the ability to respond to suggestions with distortions of perception, mood, or memory.” Is hypnosis an altered state or a state of suggestibility? According to Dr. Rosenthal, most clinicians would agree that hypnosis involves an altered state of consciousness, called “trance.” Suggestibility is a result of this altered, or trance, state that allows the subject to suspend the usual critical judgments about reality.

Researchers have dealt with the trance state by developing hypnotizability scales. Academic studies indicate that about twenty percent of the population is highly hypnotizable, ten percent are un hypnotizable, and the remainder fall between these extremes. Clinical hypnotists,

working with highly motivated clients rather than volunteer test subjects, generally see a greater degree of hypnotizability across the population.

Considering the question “What is hypnosis from the subject’s point of view?,” he drew from the work of Charles Tart the description of a subject’s trance experience, including feelings of: physical relaxation; blackness; peacefulness; diminished awareness of the immediate environment; diminished sense of identity; an increased potentiality to become anything or anyone; feeling that the experiences are “somehow timeless”; sense of oneness with the universe; diminution of mental activity; and breathing growing deeper and gradually becoming almost imperceptible. “From the subjective point of view,” said Dr. Rosenthal, “I don’t think there’s much question that we’re probably talking about a very similar state to [that which] Hemi-Sync induces . . . However,” he continued, “Hemi-Sync is probably more controlled . . . because we know what we’re plugging into the system.”

Referring to the subjective trance experience described above, he asked, “How do we get there in hypnosis as opposed to Hemi-Sync?” Hypnotic induction, through a variety of techniques, paces and leads a subject from an awake and alert state into a trance state. Pacing focuses the subject on something in his/her immediate experience that is probably below the threshold of conscious awareness, such as the feeling present in the left foot. Then, the hypnotist leads the subject to notice something which was probably not in his/her immediate experience, such as “how comfortable and relaxed” the feeling is. Thus, pairing the pacing with leading and using “deepening” procedures, the subject moves into a trance state.

A state of consciousness may be defined as “a distinct context for processing, encoding, organizing, and retrieving events from memory.” Studies show that memory is state dependent. That is, information stored in the memory while one is in a particular state can only be accessed when one reenters that same state. This is the basis for state-dependent learning. Further, “... any powerful emotion will define, induce, and create a state of its own.” Stimulation of the same emotion can therefore trigger a re-creation of the associated state, sometimes causing a “flashback.” One may not even be aware that s/he has changed states. Studies of multiple personality disorder, for instance, indicate that the individual changes state, or personality, instantly and without awareness of the change. Hypnotic induction, as a transition, draws attention to the state change.

Relative to states and state-dependent learning is the concept of “conditioning.” Conditioning, also called “anchoring” in Neuro-linguistic Programming, uses techniques, or cues, to activate a state, or retrieve stored information instantly. Hemi-Sync tape “encodings” and affirmations are examples of conditioning. Pacing and leading can be viewed as correlates to the Hemi-Sync entrainment process. Hypnosis operates primarily at the behavioral level, and Hemi-Sync operates at a neurochemical level. “You can already see,” said Dr. Rosenthal, “that Hemi-Sync would most likely be highly useful in working with hypnosis and in enhancing hypnotizability.”

Hypnotic induction, he summarized, “is a gradual transition, paced externally (by the hypnotist), that leads to a state change that the subject can perceive as such . . . and, because it can be perceived, is capable of being brought under conscious control.” Enhancements to hypnotizability also include: all drugs, sensory deprivation, and biofeedback, which help one learn to break through barriers between consciousness states more easily.

Similarities between Hemi-Sync and hypnosis continue with the experience of “clicking out.” This term is used at TMI to describe a period of time during a Hemi-Sync exercise of which the subject has no conscious memory. “The boundary between states is so significant,” explained Dr. Rosenthal, “that on returning to waking consciousness you cannot retrieve that memory.” The memory is state dependent. However, after repeatedly moving between states, familiarity is gained and the boundary is more easily breached, allowing memories to be “brought across” and incorporated into one’s sense of self. Other similarities include falling asleep, time distortion, enhanced imagery, access to affect (or emotion), and enhanced concentration and learning.

Why is Hemi-Sync-induced or a hypnosis-induced trance useful? For one thing, it feels good. Dr. Rosenthal suggested, at the bedrock level, the utility of these states lies in their aid to spiritual growth and consciousness development. Another tremendous area of usefulness is in identifying information locked in the unconscious and resulting in inappropriate state-dependent behaviors. Phobias and stress disorders are examples of such behaviors. They are very difficult to deal with at the conscious level because of the fear accompanying the initial trauma. Hemi-Sync and hypnosis allow individuals to access the states, without fear, in which the memory of the primary trauma is stored. Once accessed, both the conscious and unconscious can reorganize the information, freeing the individual from the automatic behavior.

Physical symptoms, especially chronic symptoms, are frequently related to statebound trauma. State-dependent symptoms can be seen in cases of multiple personality disorder where subjects are medically diagnosed as having a condition which is exclusive to only one particular subpersonality. Also, somatic memory, in which the body responds to the memory of a traumatic event by re-creating the physical reaction, is exemplified by phenomena such as stigmata. These data stimulate a way of thinking about physical symptoms and their connection to psychological processes, said Dr. Rosenthal, “that I like to think will change the shape of medicine within the next ten or fifteen years.” Hemi-Sync trance becomes a neutral state from which one can gain access to an experience locked in a physical symptom.

With chronic pain, one can use trance to put the pain into an unconscious state and effectively block it from the consciousness, providing the pain does not have some deeper psychological meaning associated with it.

“The ability to move comfortably, fluidly, between these different states that we’ve been gifted with to experience human consciousness,” Dr. Rosenthal concluded, “becomes optimal health.”

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